

# Yellowstone Art Museum celebrates a milestone

By Robyn Peterson  
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Yellowstone Art Museum

The Yellowstone Art Museum (formerly the Yellowstone Art Center) is celebrating its first half century throughout 2014 – and is proud to be the first contemporary art museum in the region to reach the “50” milestone.

As brave and ambitious as its founders and early supporters were, they may never have imagined how far the Billings museum would come in just a couple of generations. The reasons for this growth and success are worth reflecting upon.

The growth in the facility and operation alone are impressive. The YAM has evolved from a low-ceilinged retrofitted county jail of about 10,000 square feet to a site with 50,000 square feet of space, including a beautiful, purpose-built expansion of that county jail and an annex building – the Visible Vault – for public viewing of collection storage, the only such facility in our area.

The operating budget has multiplied literally by a factor of 100. Staff size has increased from just one to the equivalent of 17 fulltime employees.

Still, these are just statistics. They are the indicators of success, not the reason for it.

There is certainly a history of the YAM that can be told through awards, certificates, grants and accolades. However, the more remarkable achievement of the Yellowstone Art Museum is its successful history of exposing audiences to the exceptional work of Montana’s artists and building an unparalleled collection of avant-garde regional and regionally relevant art. This effort is what has consistently grabbed the hearts of Montanans and the YAM’s out-of-state visitors.

The YAM has evolved to become more than a place where artists and art lovers can converge. Truthfully, that can and does hap-



The former county jail celebrates its 50th year as a regional art museum.

pen everywhere – in garages, studios and warehouses. The YAM’s distinction is that it arose to fill a genuine gap in the art scene at the time, to serve artists who worked in non-traditional modes unrelated to the popular Wild West-derived genres, and to present and interpret this sometimes-puzzling work for the general public.

That element of public service is crucial. The YAM has staked out an identity as a steady voice for the progressive, experimental risk-takers among the region’s artists, and as a place that brings influential new work from outside the region to an area that pays a certain price due to geographical remoteness.

In the past few decades, regional art, generically speaking, has begun to gain the critical legitimacy that it has long deserved. Small and mid-sized art museums around the country that have done well are usually those that have concerned themselves with understanding and defining local artistic achievement rather than trying to be encyclopedic museums of world art in miniature. In this way, they have developed strong and distinctive identities, quirks even, and have escaped being clones of each other.

The Yellowstone Art Museum took an early lead in this effort to attain national recognition on the basis of its regional character, which is not so paradoxical a path as it may seem.

Staff members no longer live in the building or smoke while installing shows, and artists no longer throw pots in the basement (although, the latter could return ...). While there is a certain degree of nostalgia for the days when the excitement of doing something for the first time infused every effort and when practical problems found their solutions on the

fly, it is still true today that the staff and supporters are as devoted as ever to presenting thoughtful and exceptional art.

It is still true that these same people will do whatever it takes to open the doors of our museum every day and invite the curious mind to partake of the uniquely human aesthetic journey.

## “Face to Face”

The Yellowstone Art Museum is honoring the thousands of face-to-face, personal relationships that have been the lynchpin of its history with a major exhibition called “Face to Face, Wall to Wall,” curated by Senior Curator Bob Durden.

This major exhibition, on display through Aug. 24, places the work of several regional artists into a larger context, and at the same time reflects a meaningful trend in the larger world art scene.

The 50th anniversary celebration also includes special events and promotions all year, such as free admission to anyone born in 1964, an invitation to contribute a self photograph to the museum’s “Wall of Faces,” a YAM B-Day Bash for kids on June 14, a Vintage Vehicle Show on June 28, a gala on Nov. 7, and a commemorative publication.

For information, visit [artmuseum.org](http://artmuseum.org).



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## Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture park and symposium

As Montana’s logging and mining industries declined during the last two decades, the small mountain town of Lincoln found itself languishing in the economic doldrums. An unlikely project to bring internationally renowned artists to town for a sculpture symposium – and the establishment of a sculpture park – may move the town’s fortunes in a new direction.

The project, Blackfoot Pathways: Sculpture in the Wild International Sculpture Symposium, is slated for Sept. 15-Oct. 4. The project is the brainchild of Ireland’s top silversmith Kevin O’Dwyer, who is artistic director, and Lincoln resident Rick Dunkerley, an award-winning master blade smith who heads the effort as project director.

A focus on education will play a major role in the future of the project. Artists will be invited to work in the sculpture park during spring and autumn residencies. The training of local artists to deliver the on-site education program will also provide needed economic support and foster their creative expression.

At the end of the symposium, the Sculpture in the Wild park, planned for a 26-acre tract on the east edge of Lincoln, will be open to the public.

For details, visit [www.sculptureinthewild.com](http://www.sculptureinthewild.com).

## AUCTION ACTION

### Artists get red-carpet treatment by MAM

“Artists in the Spotlight” was the theme of the Missoula Art Museum’s 42nd Benefit Auction, held Feb. 1 in the University Center Ballroom. “We wanted to shine a light on the generous artist donors to the auction, and there was a healthy representation of auction artists in the crowd,” says Executive Director Laura Millin. A red-carpet photo booth, run by two artists, and a sparkling gold chandelier encouraged the dressy affair “to go over the top,” she adds.

This year’s auction yielded \$116,000 in net proceeds, compared to \$112,000 last year. The event drew 450 guests, who bid on 100 artworks, via live and silent auctions. A request to help fund educational programs brought in \$11,650.

According to Millin, the crowd reflected MAM’s initiatives “to engage the next generation of art lovers and coax them into becoming collectors.” The museum has engaged younger patrons by involving them in programming and as members of MAM’s Auction Committee, as well as featuring affordable art and mixing it into the auction with the higher end works.

The auction is the largest fundraiser of the year for MAM. Proceeds help fund its year-round educational programs and art exhibitions that are free to the public.

Among this year’s top sellers: Ryan Mitchell’s stoneware and porcelain sculpture, “Everywhere Buddha with Flowers,” went for \$5,000; and Asha Murthy MacDonald’s large landscape, “Fagan’s Rest,” brought in \$4,600.

The “experiential” category featured an array of non-art items, including a mountain retreat with James Turrell, lunch in Napa with winemaker Sean Minor, an Alberton Gorge float trip with Stephanie Frostad, and an all-access pass to the Big Sky Documentary Film.

“The event is so well-loved in Missoula and it just keeps getting better, fun, and more creative,” says Millin.

For details, visit [missoulaartmuseum.org](http://missoulaartmuseum.org).

### Snowstorm doesn’t dent YAM’s Auction 46

A snowstorm may have hampered attendance at the Yellowstone Art Museum’s Auction 46, held March 1 in Billings, but sales were up and the event supplied a festive and upbeat launch to YAM’s 50th anniversary celebration.

More than 460 artists, art collectors and volunteers attended – a drop of 10% from the previous year, “which we attribute to the very cold, snowy day,” says Executive Director Robyn Peterson.

But on a positive note, “sales were very good in spite of lower attendance,” she adds. The auction grossed more than \$328,000, netting “well over budget.” And with the post-sale continuing, the museum had sold 175 works of art for more than \$227,000 by the end of March.

Neil Jussila’s “Goshawk at Jordan,” from “Meditations on the Lyrical Nature of Being,” was the highest seller at \$6,750.

The auction is a major fundraiser and its success “ensures that the high quality exhibitions and programs we have planned for the rest of the year will take place as planned,” says Peterson.

Learn more at [www.artmuseum.org](http://www.artmuseum.org).

### C.M. Russell auction sets new records

The Russell: An Exhibition and Sale to Benefit the C.M. Russell Museum achieved record results via several auctions and sale events, March 20-23 in Great Falls. The annual event is the cornerstone of Western Art Week.

The museum raised a gross total of \$6.19 million, plus an additional \$120,000 from the “educational paddle raise.” The previous record was \$3.6 million raised in 2013.

The Russell live auction took place Saturday night, March 22, at a new venue, the



“Artists in the Spotlight” was the theme of the Missoula Art Museum’s glitzy fundraiser.

(Photo by Likatia Photography)

Mansfield Convention Center. It featured more than 150 lots of fine art, including more than a dozen original Charles M. Russell artworks. More than 90 percent of the lots in the live auction sold for a total of \$5,440,000.

The highlight of the night was Russell’s 1895 oil painting, “Offering a Truce [Bested],” which sold for \$1,250,000, and is the highest-priced piece ever sold at The Russell live auction.

“It is rare to have one or two significant, original Russell artworks in an auction, let alone a dozen, all with exceptional provenance,” notes Steve Whisler, chairman of the museum’s board of directors. “We wanted this year to surpass all others, and thanks to patrons, artists, our sponsors and the community, we vastly exceeded our goals.”

He attributes The Russell’s success with established and new events that took place throughout the weekend. The Thursday evening silent auction of fine art, objects and unique travel experiences raised \$432,000 in gross sales. The Russell Art in Action® was another successful sellout, grossing \$200,000 in art sales, with 100 percent of the proceeds donated to the museum.

New to the event lineup was the First Strike Friday Night Auction at the Mansfield Center. The event was a hit with 40 works by top-trending western artists grossing \$120,000.

For more on The Russell, visit [www.cmrussell.org/the-russell](http://www.cmrussell.org/the-russell).